Defining The Vedic, Cosmopolitan Hindu Woman
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Defining The Vedic, Cosmopolitan Hindu Woman

Singh, Yashika

Caught in the tug-of-war between Western lifestyle, fashion and glamour and our own beautiful ancient Hindu traditions, the modern Hindu woman is earnestly searching for her place in today's cosmopolitan world.

In my homeland, South Africa Hindus have suffered greatly under Apartheid - in education, business, politics and religion. Amidst all this, it is the Hindu wife and mother who has preciously maintained the customs and traditions we brought form India over 100 years ago. Like a priceless gem, she has brightened our homes with Hindu culture during South Africa's Darkest times.

Nevertheless, the "old order" of thinking persists - that a woman's only role in life is servility and submission to man. In the Dharma Shastras, Manu dictates that women be the property of men. From this has come female prejudice and abuse and this, unfortunately, has sowed the seeds for sexism, wife battering and dowry murders.

In the oldest Vedic Period a woman was looked at quite differently - as a sensitive, intelligent individual who could pursue almost anything she wished: education, grihastha life, a priestly life, the path of brahmacharini, or even sannyasini. Then various factors including the jati caste system closed the door on such freedoms. The jati caste system (based on birth) is a gross misconception of the true varna system of the Vedic Period. The varna system was based on "guna," the qualities of an individual.

Today, the traditional role of the Hindu woman has definitely changed, not by disrespecting religious custom or belief, but increasingly from social and economic factors. Often wives are simply forced to work to supplement family income. In so doing, she sensitively responds to grihastha needs without undermining her husband's role as the head of the household. Also, in doing so, she experiences more independent self-worth and healthy self-assertiveness. Important family decisions are now more often made jointly and she is no longer considered "inferior."

However a word of caution is due. This new-found sense of "independent self-worth" does not mean rebellion to subtle Hindu codes of conduct. Nor does it infer or promote indifference to sacred traditions and rituals. To the contrary, it should strengthen religious family life. Following Vedic injunctions, a woman can assist at prayer services, hold workshops on education, host conferences, work on social welfare levels, etc. But still, a woman's most subtle and sacred role as mother, wife and "best friend" will never be diminished by a new-found, more self-assertive identity.

My peers, a generation of career-minded Hindu girls, should acknowledge their inner strengths, remembering that even Sri Rama acknowledged Sita's wisdom and sublime counsel. But, we should not attempt to "be like men" - as many Western feminists would have us. Rather, we should blend our natural interests, gifts and talents with our wonderful feminine qualities of love, compassion and intuition into a combined force to wield a greater shakti in nurturing our culture. Sound sentimental, romantic? Yes, indeed, it is! And why not? It is through supernal passions and sentimentality of Godly song that even the most hardened "male" hearts have been soulfully smitten! And we women possess these strengths, not weaknesses.

I firmly believe the modern Hindu woman has an extremely important role to play in the global future of Hinduism. The manifold possibilities for us to nurture new directions and pursue paths and interests guaranteed us by the original Vedic Dharma can only assist in bringing about a richer Hindu society for our children.

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